

The Bride Unveiled: Influences on and Interpretations of the Alhambra

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Few buildings from the Middle Ages have increasingly captured the imagination of visitors throughout time like the Alhambra. According to Lonely Planet, 6,000 tourists visit the Alhambra in Granada, Spain, per day¹ to immerse themselves in the lush gardens and stunning decoration of the Alhambra palaces.



Palace of the Lions

¹ Robert Irwin, *The Alhambra* (London: Profile Books, 2004), 67.

The Alhambra occupies an outcrop of the Sierra Nevada, on a site of 720 meters by 200 meters.² The fortress-like walls surrounding the complex have twenty-three surviving towers and four gates. Within the walls was a small city: houses of all classes, palaces, offices, a Royal Mint, public and private mosques, workshops, garrisons, prisons, baths³, a zoo, an aviary, and game reserve.⁴ There is no regular arrangement of buildings, given that construction was done in multiple stages over centuries, and the architecture currently is a hodgepodge of the various styles that characterized the time period between the ninth and sixteenth centuries. Since the Alhambra has been heavily damaged and massively reconstructed throughout time, it is not clear what it looked like during the time of the Nasrids, the dynasty who originally built the Alhambra in the Almohad period.

Much scholarship has taken place regarding the Palace of the Lions, one of two palaces that survived out of the original six or seven. What makes it such a rich mine for study is the plentiful decoration types and styles, as well as its unusual floorplan and central fountain. While many differing viewpoints on the Palace of the Lions have been carefully noted and capably supported, all agree that the Alhambra is a wonderful mosaic in which influences from Europe, the Almohads, the Fatimids, and the Eastern Islamic world can be seen. Instead of giving just detailed, step-by-step description of the floorplan and layout of the palaces (which abound in the literature), I will focus on an overview of the Alhambra, a few of the unique features of the Palace of the Lions that reflect cultural syncretism, and then examine how scholars and writers of varying approaches have viewed the Alhambra over time.

Building on the Sabika Hill⁵ began in the ninth century when a citadel, known as “al-hamrā” because of its color (from which the Alhambra may have gotten its name) was constructed. “Alhambra” may also be a play on the name of Muhammad I, who was also known as Muhammad ibn al-Ahmar ibn Nasr.⁶ In the eleventh century, the citadel was linked with the defenses of the town of Granada. Between 1052 and 1056, Joseph ibn Naghrela, the Jewish vizier to the Nasrids, may have built his palace on the site of the Alhambra.⁷

² Marianne Barrucand and Achim Bednorz, "The Architecture of the Nasrids," in *Moorish Architecture in Andalusia*, (Cologne: Taschen, 1992), 185.

³ Barrucand and Bednorz, 187.

⁴ Irwin, 21.

⁵ Barrucand and Bednorz, 183.

⁶ Acedo, 14.

⁷ Blair and Bloom, 124.

The building of the Nasrid palaces themselves have been variously attributed to Isma'īl I (r. 1314-21)⁸, Yusuf I (r. 1333-54), and his son Muhammad V (r. 1354-1359, 1362-91),⁹ but the Alhambra as it currently stands is very different from how it was in their time. The Palace of the Lions is thought to be built primarily by Muhammad V. The route the visitor takes, while highly directed, is not the same: windows have been converted into doors, beds into passageways, and the two palaces are now connected.¹⁰

While the Alhambra is known commonly as the “Alhambra palace,” in reality the Alhambra was more like a synthesis of early Islamic palaces and a fortified town in the medieval sense. The Alhambra had its own *qadi*, or judge, just like any other Muslim town in the Middle Ages.¹¹ In contrast, Madinat al-Zahra outside Córdoba was literally a palace, in the same sense as Versailles or Buckingham Palace.¹²

The idea of a fortified town comes from both Roman and second-century Central Asian traditions.¹³ Oleg Grabar, true to his background in early Umayyad art and architecture, lays this out in his 1978 book on the Alhambra. Roman villas, as shown in Central Asian and North African mosaics, were often fortified.¹⁴ Umayyad palaces in the East, such as the palace of Mshatta in Jordan, also copied this tradition. The fortifications, while functional to a small degree, were actually used as a sign of power and authority. Prestige lay in owning a fortress-palace.¹⁵ Walls of complexes such as the Alhambra were not so much for defense as they were for separating the elite from the commoners.¹⁶ Having a royal city within the larger urban complex can also be seen the world over: Rome, Byzantine Constantinople, and Abbasid Samarra are such examples.¹⁷

Palaces, such as the Palace of the Lions, have played an important part in Islamic mythology. They were the setting of the mysterious real and imaginary worlds of splendor, intrigue, and romance. The lavish palaces of the Abbasids, after which the Umayyads in Córdoba

⁸ James Dickie, "The Palaces of the Alhambra," in *Al-Andalus: The Art of Islamic Spain*, ed. Jerrilynn D. Dodds, (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1992), 135.

⁹ Acedo, 18.

¹⁰ Dickie, 135.

¹¹ Irwin, 21.

¹² Irwin, 19.

¹³ Oleg Grabar, *The Alhambra*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), 105.

¹⁴ Grabar, 107.

¹⁵ Grabar, 108.

¹⁶ Grabar, 113.

¹⁷ Grabar, 108.

modeled theirs, were part of a long tradition of legendary palaces: the Persian palace of Shirin, Solomon's palace-temple¹⁸, and the *Arabian Nights* story of the golden palace-city and garden Iram of the Pillars. Real palaces such as Nero's Domus Aureus also formed part of the collective memory of the Middle Ages. According to Grabar, six features of the Domus Aureus influenced the construction of Islamic palaces: grand size, different kinds of water (pools, fountains, hot, cold), luxury of surfaces, artificially composed nature (as in gardens or agriculture), representation of cities and buildings, and the dome of heaven, which I will discuss later in terms of the domes in the Palace of the Lions.¹⁹ The use of elevated belvederes, gates, and towers as reception halls with vistas of the surrounding landscapes have Eastern precedents in Seljuq palaces in Anatolia and Isfahan, Madinah al-Zahra, and Lashkari Bazar in Afghanistan.²⁰

However, unlike these other palaces, the purpose of the Palace of the Lions was not to glorify materials or feats of engineering, or even to impress the subjects of the king, but to provide its inhabitants with an intimate, entertaining living space.²¹ In terms of architectural or artistic innovation, most scholars seem to agree that the Palace of the Lions, and the Alhambra overall, was a "formal dead end."²² It was the culmination of Nasrid artistic achievement, but it did not spawn contemporary imitations. Traditional architecture, not technology, was prized among the Nasrids. Innovative technology, such as the polylobed vault of the Tower of the Infantas was only used where its practical values were not challenged, such as in baths or less important rooms.²³

The builders made a conscious choice to not use the available stone that the Christian kings later exploited. This was not unique to the Nasrids; in the Islamic empires, palaces had to be built quickly because there was no guarantee that the patron's power would outlast the building of an elaborate palace. Palaces were also highly personal buildings, and there was no interest in preserving a predecessor's palace when the succeeding king was expected to build his own.²⁴

¹⁸ D.F. Ruggles, "Arabic Poetry and Architectural Memory in Al-Andalus." *Ars Orientalis* 23, (1993), 171.

¹⁹ Oleg Grabar, "From Dome of Heaven to Pleasure Dome," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 49, no. 1 (1990): 15-16.

²⁰ Hermann, 62.

²¹ Grabar, *The Alhambra*, 185.

²² Grabar, *The Alhambra*, 182.

²³ *Ibid.*, 172 and 174.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 169.

In addition, palaces simply were not important enough to be built to last. Mosques, as houses of God, were. God is the only eternal being. All other things in this world are transitory, and to make something that would last forever is futile, as all things are destroyed at the end of the world. For example, Surah 3, verse 186, of the Qur'an reads in part, "... And the life of this world is nothing but an illusory enjoyment." The way the light constantly shifts in the Lions Palace, the fragile quality of the stucco carvings, the undulating lines and kaleidoscopic geometries, are all evidence of this worldview. The Nasrids, with their precarious position between the Christians in the north and the Marinids in the south, could not have been more aware of the transitory nature of things. Even their motto, "*La ghaliba illallah*"²⁵—"There is no conqueror or dominant influence but Allah"—was poignantly inscribed over and over on the walls of their palaces in a tense and unstable political environment.

The way the Palace of the Lions' plain exterior belies its elaborate interior also harkens back to tradition. Umayyad culture frowned upon outward displays of wealth and ostentation, and as such, the palaces are interiorized and meant to be seen from their centers, not to be appreciated by an outsider or through a façade.²⁶

The decoration of the Palace of the Lions can be generally characterized as delicate and over-refined, but well-made.²⁷ There are three types of decoration: vegetal, geometric, and epigraphic. The repetitive stucco carving and tiling in particular has received much attention. While stucco carving is also known from the caliphal period, glazed polychrome tiles were introduced by the Almohads when they ruled Spain in the twelfth century. While they used

Robert Irwin, on the other hand, believed that the decoration is informed by mathematics. Repetition of unity resulted in the number, which formed a spiritual image that resulted in the human soul. For the game- and puzzle-loving Nasrid elite, the purpose of the decoration was entertainment and contemplation,²⁸ to free the mind the same way as watching running water, or the flames of a fire.²⁹ Nasrid textiles also followed the simple and austere decorative style of the Alhambra.³⁰

²⁵ Irwin, 44.

²⁶ Grabar, *The Alhambra*, 166.

²⁷ Hillenbrand, "The Muslim West." In *Islamic Art and Architecture*. New York: Thames and Hudson Inc., 1999, 193.

²⁸ Irwin, 104.

²⁹ Acedo, 90.

³⁰ Irwin, 33.

The austerity and repetition of the vegetal and geometric designs are frequently broken up by epigraphy. The calligraphy carved into the palace architecture comprises of Qur'anic verses as well as poetry. The use of poetry is unique to the Western Islamic world and rare in the Islamic world before the 14th century. The poems are all at eye level as well; therefore, visitors were expected to read it. All of the poetry is by Ibn Zamrak, one of the last great poets of Muslim Spain.³¹ The charm of the poetry lies in its style, how it anthropomorphizes the various parts of the palace. The poems on the fountains, niches, and windows describe their qualities and their allegiance to the king, in the voice of the object.³² For example, the top of one of the lookouts, the mirador of Lindaraja, reads, in part,

All the arts have enriched me with their own special beauty and given me their splendor and perfection... when you look into my splendid depths, you believe that the full moon has abandoned her mansions to live in mine and keep here her dwelling place... I look over a lovely garden; no eyes have ever beheld anything similar to it... Surely I am in this garden an eye filled with joy and the pupil of this eye is veritably my lord.³³

While visitors and inhabitants could be entertained by the walls of the palace, the ceiling provide additional visual interest, namely, the painted ceilings of the Hall of Kings and the *muqarnas* domes of the Hall of the Two Sisters and the Hall of Abencerrages.

The Hall of Kings' two painted ceilings are the only example of figurative imagery in all the Nasrid palaces. One is a painting on leather of ten seated men in Arab dress, and the other shows a chivalric tale. The ten men have been said to represent the Nasrid rulers, but this is hardly possible³⁴, because Muhammad V, who built the Hall, was the eighth Nasrid king.³⁵ The chivalric tale depicts a Muslim and a Christian competing for the favor of a Christian woman. The departure from traditional aniconic Islamic art has been variously explained as being painted by artists of the Avignon school³⁶ or Tuscan influence on Muslim painters.³⁷ But no one seems to

³¹ Grabar, *The Alhambra*, 101.

³² Nasser Rabbat, "The Palace of the Lions, Alhambra and the Role of Water in its Conception," *Environmental Design: Journal of the Islamic Environmental Design Research Centre* 2, (1985): 68.

³³ Acedo, 126.

³⁴ Barrucand and Bednorz, 196.

³⁵ Acedo, 24.

³⁶ Barrucand and Bednorz, 196.

³⁷ Acedo, 117.

have a good explanation about why the previously fanatical Almohads permitted figurative imagery in the Hall of Kings. Perhaps the Almohad rulers were becoming more relaxed in their rules and decided that drawing secular figures and themes could be permitted under Islam.

In contrast to unusual painted ceilings of the Hall of Kings, the *muqarnas* vaults of the Halls of the Abencerrages and the Two Sisters are a look back at tradition. *Muqarnas* was a technique that was first developed in tenth-century Iran and (possibly independently) in 11th-century North Africa.³⁸ In the *muqarnas* technique, prisms of wood and stucco elements are hung from a ceiling or arch. In fact, it has been suggested that the *muqarnas* technique itself is meant to represent stalactites in a cave. Caves are important in Islamic tradition, as the Prophet Muhammad (*saw*) received the first revelation of the Qur'an in a cave on Mount Hira, and in the same cave, the story of the miracle of the spider also took place.³⁹

According to Grabar, the *muqarnas* are a representation of the rotating dome of heaven, which in turn represents the mastery of time. Windows surround the dome from below, and light turns around the base of the dome and vary the look of the dome. The inscription on the walls directly suggests the allusion of heaven. In the Hall of the Two Sisters, for example, the poem mentions the constellation of Gemini and the full moon. In many traditions, such as Late Antique, Iran, India, and China, the heavenly spheres were the king's protector, and their infinity was mirrored in the king's eternally legitimate power.⁴⁰ Since it is thought that both halls were used for music, the dome of heaven is equated with the dome of pleasure by Grabar. This is a direct descendant of the Roman tradition as illustrated in Nero's Domus Aureus, in which a rotating dome topped a banquet hall. Muslims managed to preserve and maintain this classical relationship between the dome of heaven and the dome of pleasure for two reasons: they rejected the Christianization of the dome of Heaven in the fifth and sixth centuries, and unlike the Christian kings in Northern Europe, Muslim kings had the financial resources, the dynastic security, and ideological ambitions to copy Nero.⁴¹

Most scholars have seen the Palace of the Lions as an image of Paradise. For example, in Surah 55, verse 63 of the Qur'an, Paradise is described as being comprised of four gardens. The

³⁸ Grabar, *The Alhambra*, 176.

³⁹ Acedo, 113.

⁴⁰ Grabar, "From the Dome of Heaven to Pleasure Dome," 16.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 20.

trees, streams, fruits, and the two pavilions on the east and west ends of the court that shelter small fountains all have been seen as literal copies of the metaphors employed in the Qur'an.

Such an interpretation, rooted in the Qur'an, is seen elsewhere in philosophy and architecture. For the secret Andalusian club known as the Brethren of Piety, the celestial vault was divided into four parts.⁴² Gardens in Persia were also sometimes divided into four parts, called *char-baaghs*,⁴³ and the idea of garden pavilions may have Persian precedents as well.⁴⁴ For Nasser Rabbat, though, the Court of the Lions was not conceived in the image of Paradise. It was an earthly garden for earthly pleasure.⁴⁵ It was in the tradition of the Roman *villa rustica*: an escape from the court life of the Comares Palace into an emulation of the rural environment.⁴⁶

The layout of the Court of Lions has also prompted speculation. Acedo suggests that the unusual colonnaded court was inspired by Benedictine monasteries that Muhammad V would have seen when he was exiled to Pedro of Castile's Court in 1360. Another theory, suggested by Juan Carlos Ruiz Souza, is that the Court of Lions was a combination of a *madrasa* (an orthodox Islamic school for the sciences), a *zawiya* (where Sufi holy men lived), and the tomb of Muhammad V.⁴⁷ His reasoning is that none has been found yet in Spain among such a cultured and educated people,⁴⁸ *madrasas* in North Africa have a similar floor plan and function as tombs,⁴⁹ and they were popular with the Marinids, the North African allies of the Nasrids⁵⁰, where Muhammad V lived in exile from 1359-1362, the same time period that Acedo says he lived in Castile

Even in its own time, the Alhambra was looked upon with disapproval. Ibn Khaldun, a North African philosopher and historian, was a member of Muhammad V's court from 1363-1365. In his history book, the *Muqaddimah*, he discusses the Nasrids as a decadent and doomed family. The Seville orange trees (like those in the Court of Lions), he notes, produce no edible fruit, but are planted only for their appearance. Such an interest and variety of luxury is indicative of rulers who have relaxed, and such rulers will certainly lose everything within three

⁴² Irwin, 106.

⁴³ Rabbat, 70.

⁴⁴ Acedo, 105.

⁴⁵ Rabbat, 70.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁴⁷ 95

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 94

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 108

generations.⁵¹ Otherwise, in the contemporary poetry about palaces that was written about the Alhambra, it is difficult to separate the facts from the clichés about palaces that poets were given to using.

It is actually quite an accident that the Alhambra has survived. Irwin attributes this chance survival to the fact that the Alhambra was regarded as a victory monument for the Christian kings, and that its beauty was too highly regarded to be pulled down. And this is true. The fall of the last Muslim outpost in Granada was the culmination of a centuries-old dream for the Christian kings of the North. As such, it had to be preserved for future generations. Having co-existed with Muslims, Ferdinand and Isabella were quite familiar with Moorish culture, and clearly admired the Alhambra and Andalusian culture, even sometimes wearing Arab dress.⁵²

Christopher Columbus, who witnessed Granada being turned over to Ferdinand and Isabella, saw the event not simply as the victory of Christians over the Muslims, but also as a mandate for the spread of Catholicism abroad, as he writes in his *Journal*:

... I saw the royal banners of your Highnesses planted by force of arms upon the towers of the Alhambra, which is the fortress of that city, and saw the Moorish king come out at the gate of the city and kiss the hands of your Highnesses, and of the Prince my Sovereign... Your Highnesses, as Catholic Christians, and princes who love and promote the holy Christian faith, and are enemies of the doctrine of Mahomet, and of all idolatry and heresy, determined to send me, Christopher Columbus, to the above-mentioned countries of India, to see the said princes, people, and territories, and to learn their disposition and the proper method of converting them to our holy faith....⁵³

This only explains why the Alhambra wasn't destroyed immediately. Under the rule of King Charles V (r. 1516-56)⁵⁴ a palace was built in the Alhambra, to make the Alhambra a center of his growing empire, and a foothold into possible expansion into Africa. So even when Granada's importance as a symbol faded from national memory, the construction of the palace of Charles V transformed the Alhambra into protected property under succeeding monarchs.

⁵¹ Irwin, 37 and 39.

⁵² Irwin, 18.

⁵³ Paul Halsall, "Medieval Sourcebook: Christopher Columbus: Extracts from Journal." in *Internet History Sourcebooks Project* [database online], [New York: Fordham University, Feb 25 2001 (cited Mar 19 2005)], available from the World Wide Web: (<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/columbus1.html>).

⁵⁴ Sheila S. Blair and Jonathon M. Bloom, "Architecture and the Arts in the Maghrib Under the Hafsids, Marinids, and Nasrids," in *The Art and Architecture of Islam, 1250-1800* (New York: Yale University Press, 1995), 124.

The builders of the Isaac Mehab's synagogue in Córdoba⁵⁵ and Samuel Halevi Abulafia, treasurer of Peter I of Castile, looked to the Alhambra and the Palace of the Lions in particular, as a model for the decoration of his private synagogue, El Tránsito, in Toledo⁵⁶. The stylistic use of Arabic inscriptions, muqarnas, and stucco decoration are not just slavish copies of Nasrid decoration. Jews in Spain, who lived within Islamic society for hundreds of years, identified with the culture of Moorish Spain and considered it something they shared with Spanish Muslims.⁵⁷ In addition, the Castilian court style which was also based on Nasrid decoration, so in building this synagogue, Halevi could identify himself with his king.⁵⁸

The British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli, an admirer of Arabs (whom he called "Jews on horseback") looked back on the Alhambra in 1832 as a monument to be equated with the Parthenon and the Pantheon. Being Jewish, when Jews in public office were rare and anti-Semitism was prevalent in most parts of Europe, he looked back on the tolerant age of Islamic Spain as a golden one for Jews,⁵⁹ and probably about Jews in power such as ibn Naghrela and Abulafia.

For Arabs, falling far behind in technology and political power against the Europeans, the Alhambra became a representation of what had been lost. From the nineteenth century onwards, the Alhambra became a popular place for Arabs to visit and reflect on this loss.⁶⁰ When Disraeli visited the Alhambra, an old woman he encountered said that many of the Moorish visitors were saying that the Alhambra would soon be theirs again.⁶¹ Poets such as the Egyptian neo-classical poet Ahmad Shawqi, who was exiled to Spain in the late nineteenth century, compared his exile to that of the Muslims driven from Spain during the *Reconquista*.

However, some see the Alhambra as a symbol of Arab potential that must be realized again now as it was under the Muslims in Spain. Hanan al-Shaykh, a Lebanese member of the Arab literary diaspora wrote in *Gobshite* magazine in 2003, "...we Arabs today have no connection with the Arabs of Andalusia, with those who... have carved and embellished to such

⁵⁵ Jerrilynn D. Dodds, "Mudejar Tradition and Synagogues of Medieval Spain: Cultural Identity and Cultural Hegemony," in *Convivencia: Jews, Muslims, and Christians in Medieval Spain*, ed. Vivian B. Mann, Jerrilynn D. Dodds, and Thomas F. Glick, (New York: G. Braziller, 1992), 122

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 124.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 125.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 128.

⁵⁹ Irwin, 150.

⁶⁰ Irwin., 181.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 182.

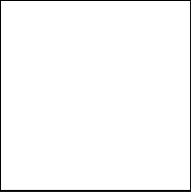
melodious perfection.... Why is it that we didn't complete our cultural journey, and how is it that we have ended up today in the very worst of times?"⁶²

The Alhambra, as we see it today, is a mosaic. Our perceptions of it are shaped by the actual building in front of us, its history, and also the varying approaches to it that scholars and writers have taken throughout time. While its relative importance has ebbed and flowed throughout time, it has always been part of the collective memory of Arabs and Europeans alike. It still resonates powerfully with visitors, mostly because of the contradictions they illustrate. The delicate, fragile palaces that were never meant to be preserved are surrounded by impenetrable walls a thousand years old. The tenets of religion inform and decorate these palaces that are made, essentially, for temporal power and secular pleasure. While it is beautiful, it is cheaply made. Its decoration is perfect, but not innovative. What is more, it represents the mixture of cultures that the Nasrids had to balance politically and culturally throughout their time in Andalusia: their North African ancestry, their employment under the Umayyads, and their vassalage under the Castilians.

⁶² Ibid., 184.

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